

ARE CHRISTIANS BEHIND TIMES ON MARRIAGE?

Legislation to allow same-sex marriage came into force in March 2014. For some, this watershed amendment to the legal definition of marriage represented a victory against discrimination. For others, it represented an alarming case of 'social engineering' by the state of an institution whose existence precedes the state and is therefore beyond the state's legitimate authority to redefine.

Christian voices were among those who expressed concern over changes to the legal definition of marriage. Why is that? Is it simply because the church is 'behind the times' on important issues such as equality and human freedom, as some have suggested?

From a public relations perspective things would be much easier for the Church if it kept its views on marriage to itself. However, it is precisely because Christians are concerned with notions of equality and human freedom that they have something to say about marriage.

Social theorists recognise that the ideals of equality and individual freedom must always be balanced against the need for societal flourishing and stability without which equality and individual freedom cannot exist. Stable societies rest on strong foundations and Christians believe that the most fundamental building block underpinning a stable society is a healthy marriage between a man and a woman. Marriage allows for the creation of children in a loving environment in which each gender has an irreplaceable role to play in the nurture and development of the child. Even secular studies agree that children thrive best in loving homes with a mother and a father; and although the best is not always possible in a complicated world it is something we should all aim for, particularly on behalf of our children. A compassionate society must ensure that the importance of adult desires does not take precedence over children's needs.

In addition to its social utility, Christians also believe that marriage is a sacred thing. The lifelong partnership between a man and a woman reflects something of the mystery of the triune God in whose image we are all created, male and female. It demonstrates a strong and beautiful symbiosis of unity in diversity in a way that same-sex relationships cannot.

The essayist G.K. Chesterton wisely cautioned that one should never take a fence down unless one knows the reason it was put up. Christians are of the view that the institution of marriage as between one man and one woman exists for good reasons; reasons that are obvious to anyone whether or not they believe, as Christians do, that marriage is a sacred gift from God. That is why throughout history and in virtually all human societies marriage has always been about the union of a man and a woman.

In saying all this it is worth stressing that according to Jesus, regardless of our creed, colour, upbringing or lifestyle, we are all broken and equally in need of God. Those who wish to follow Jesus will inevitably discover, rather uncomfortably, that he will challenge their preconceived notions of the way things ought to be. Nevertheless, they will also discover in the process one who loves them in a more complete way than they've ever known love before.